The Elephant's Footprint

A Simile for the Path to True Knowledge

From the Cūḷahatthipadopamasutta (MN 27)

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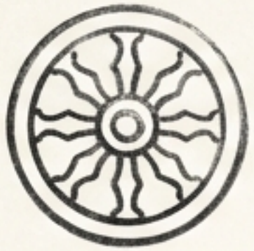
An Encounter on the Road to Sāvatthī



The brahmin Jānussoṇi, traveling in his chariot, meets the wanderer Pilotika. He asks a simple question:

“What do you think of the ascetic Gotama’s lucidity of wisdom? Do you think he’s astute?”

Pilotika’s reply suggests a depth that cannot be easily judged from the outside:

“My good man, who am I to judge…? You’d really have to be on the same level to judge his lucidity of wisdom.”

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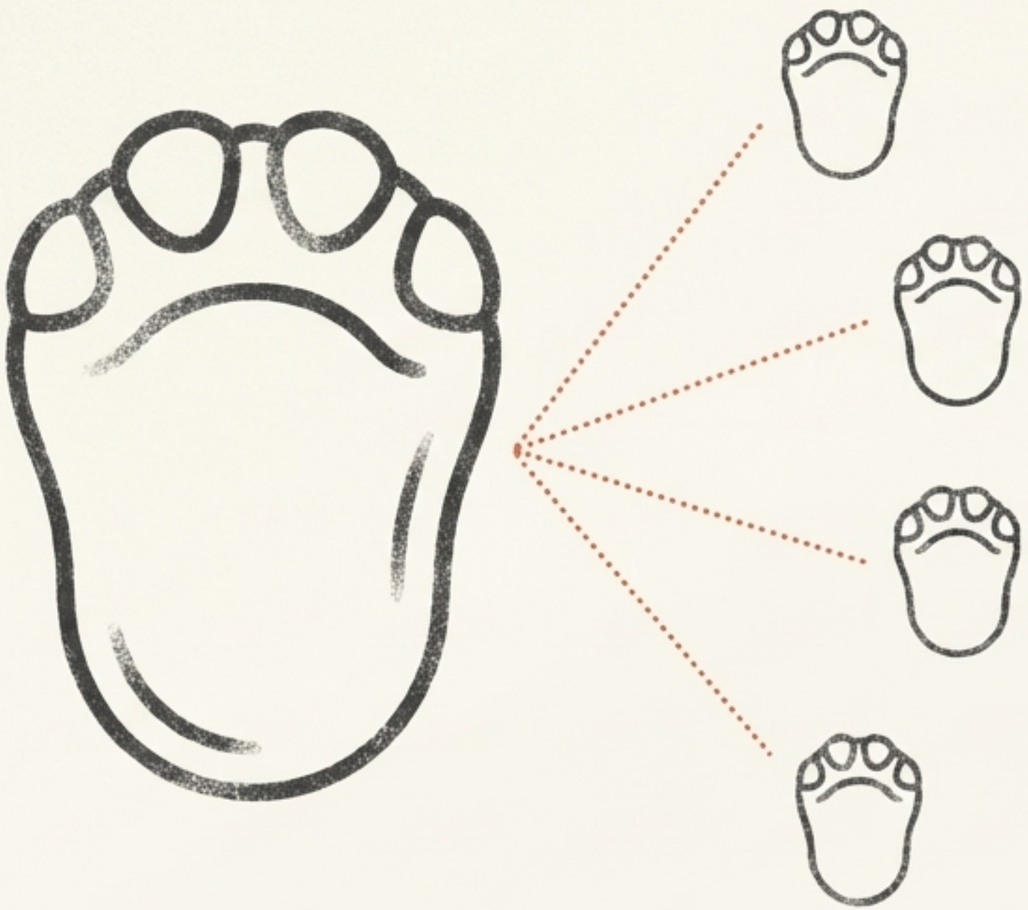
A Tracker in the Woods Finds a Clue



"Suppose that a skilled bull elephant tracker were to enter a bull elephant wood. There he'd see a large elephant's footprint, long and broad. He would come to the conclusion, 'This must be a big bull elephant."

Pilotika explains that, like the tracker, he has seen **four "footprints" of the Buddha** that lead him to an undeniable conclusion: "The Blessed One is a fully awakened Buddha. The teaching is well explained. The Saṅgha is practicing well."

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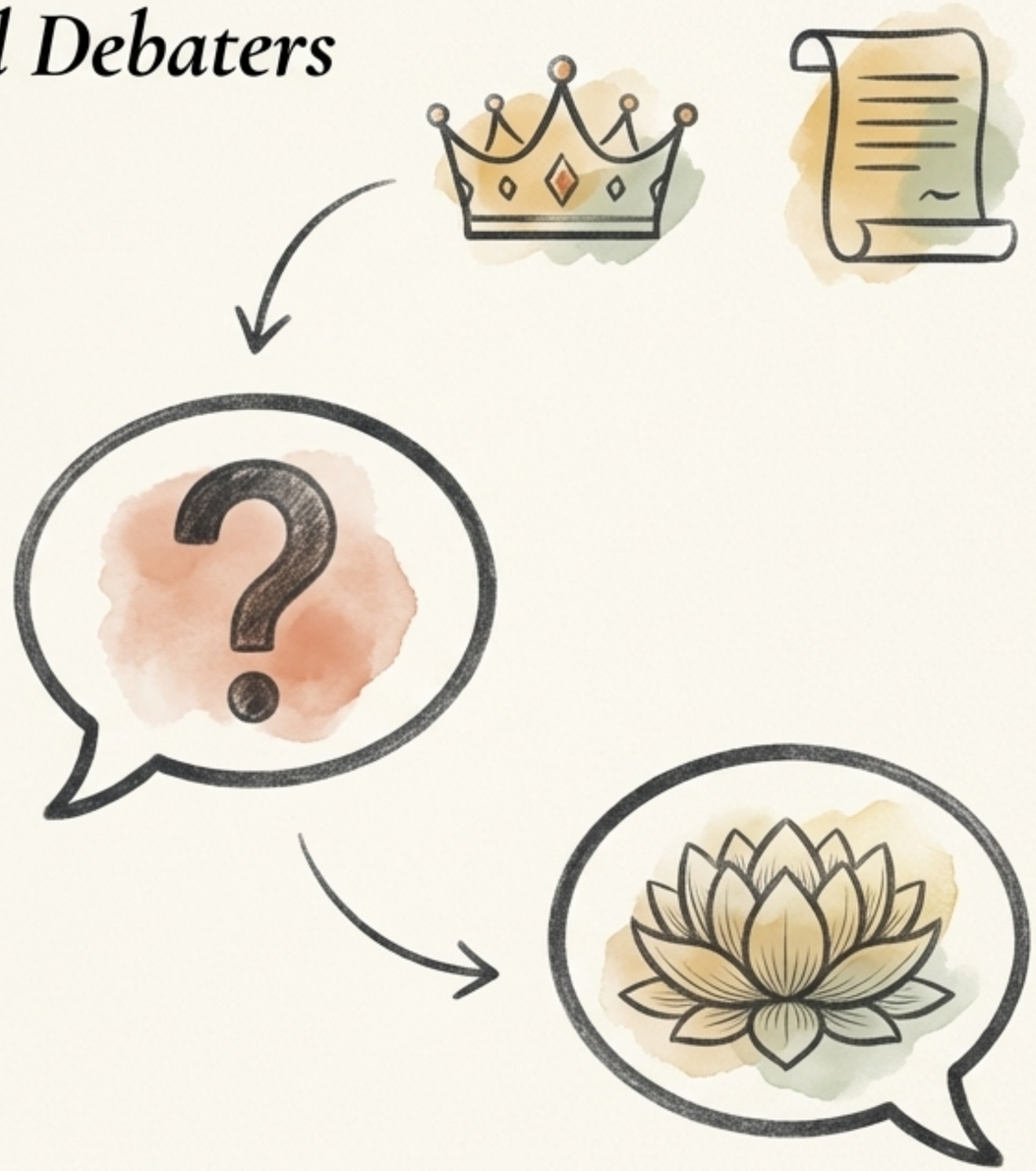
The First Footprint: *The Silenced Debaters*

Pilotika explains his first piece of evidence:

Clever Aristocrats & Brahmins: Described as “subtle, accomplished in the doctrines of others, hair-splitters,” they prepare questions to refute the Buddha.

The Encounter: After hearing a Dhamma talk, they are educated, encouraged, and inspired.

The Result: ‘They don’t even get around to asking their question... Invariably, they become his disciples.”



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The Final Footprint: The Transformed Ascetics

The evidence continues:

- **Clever Householders**: They too become disciples.
- **Clever Ascetics**: Like the others, they come to debate but instead ask for ordination. After practicing, they “realize the supreme end of the spiritual path in this very life.”

‘We were almost lost! We almost perished! For we used to claim that we were ascetics... but we were none of these things. But now we really are.’

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A Conclusion Reached Through Inference

Deeply moved, Jānussoṇi gets down from his chariot, pays homage, and expresses his desire to meet the Buddha. He later finds the Buddha and recounts everything he heard from Pilotika, presenting the completed simile as he understands it.

‘Homage to that Blessed One, the perfected one, the fully awakened Buddha!’
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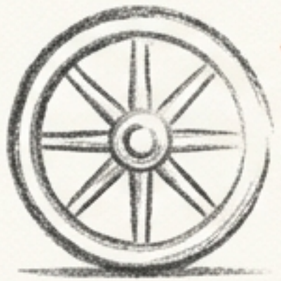

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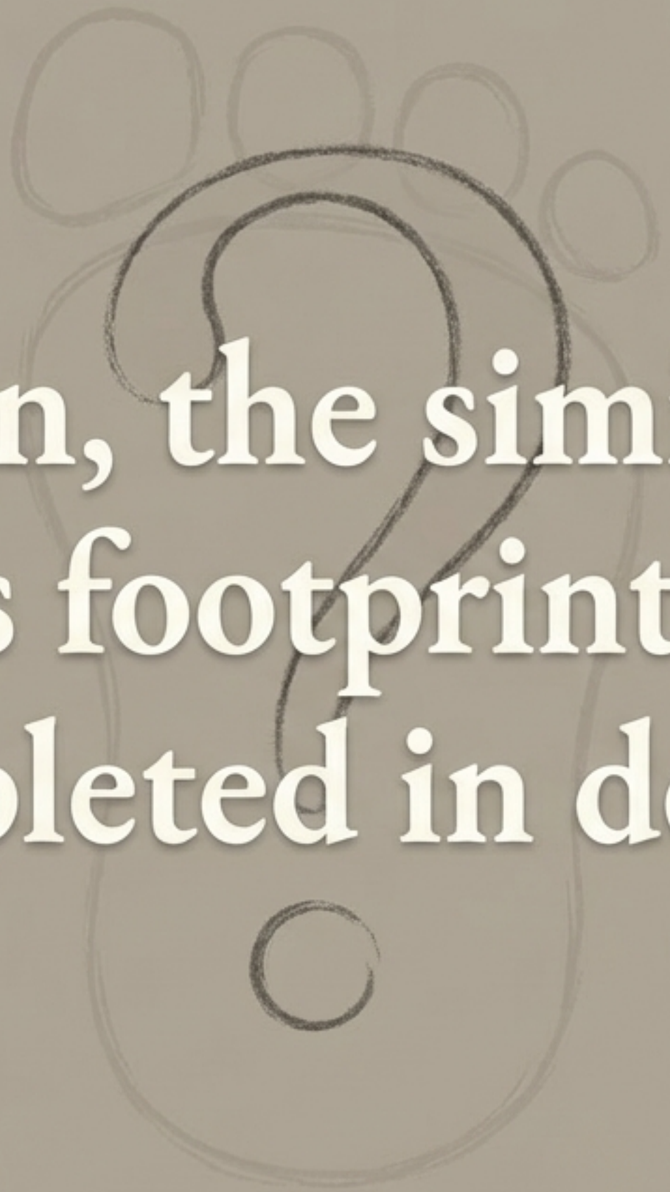

“Brahmin, the simile of the elephant’s footprint is not yet completed in detail.”

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Why the First Clue Isn’t Enough

The Buddha explains that a skilled tracker doesn’t jump to conclusions. The large footprint could belong to others:

1. Dwarf cow elephants with big footprints.
2. Tall lofty cow elephants.
3. Tall matriarch cow elephants.

The Key Insight: To be certain, the tracker must follow the tracks further, look for higher traces like tusk-marks and broken branches, and finally *see* the bull elephant itself—

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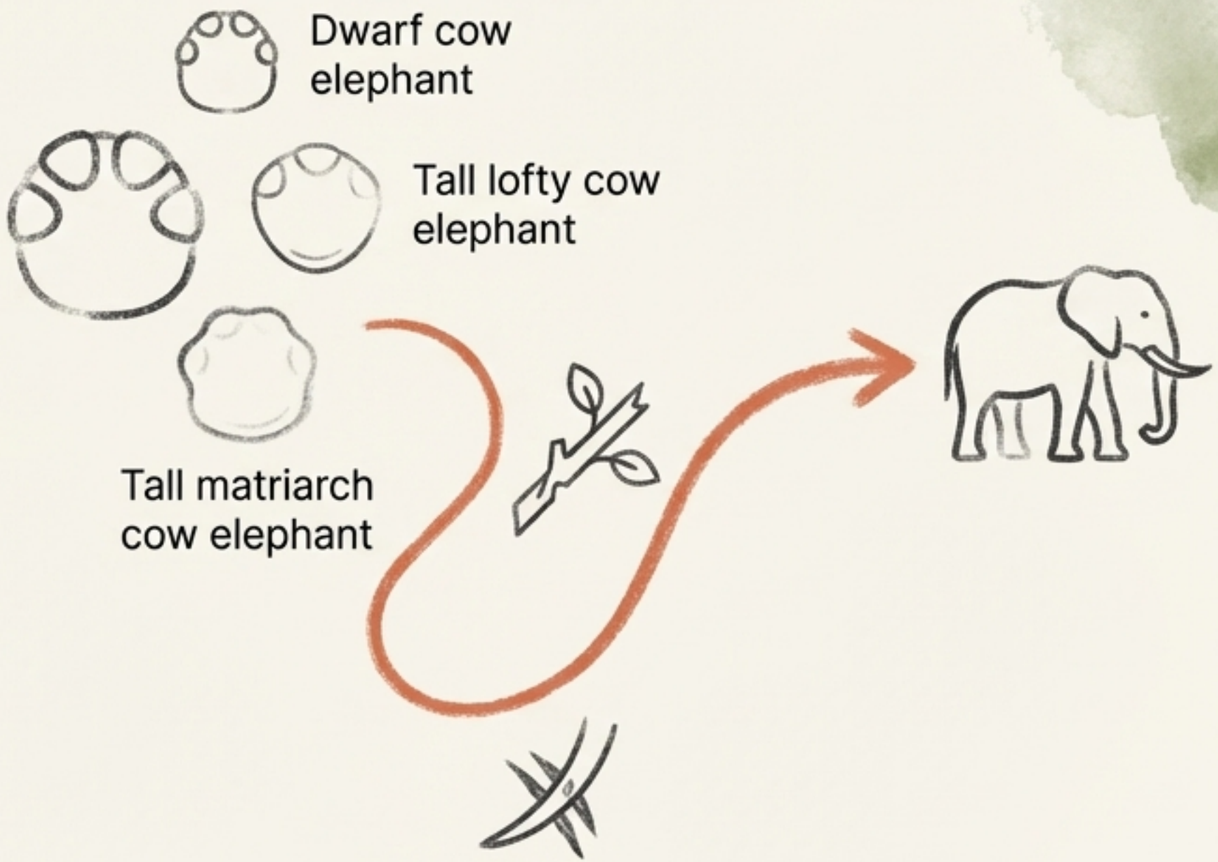
“walking, standing, sitting, or lying down.”



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The True Path Begins: The Foundation of Noble Ethics

"They're like a bird: wherever it flies, wings are its only burden."

The Buddha's path starts when a person gains faith, goes forth, and undertakes the training.

This includes abstaining from:
* Harming life, stealing, unchastity, lying.
* Divisive, harsh, or nonsensical speech.
* Injuring plants, eating at the wrong time, entertainment, adornments, high beds, and receiving money or property.

When they have this entire spectrum of noble ethics, they experience a blameless happiness inside themselves.

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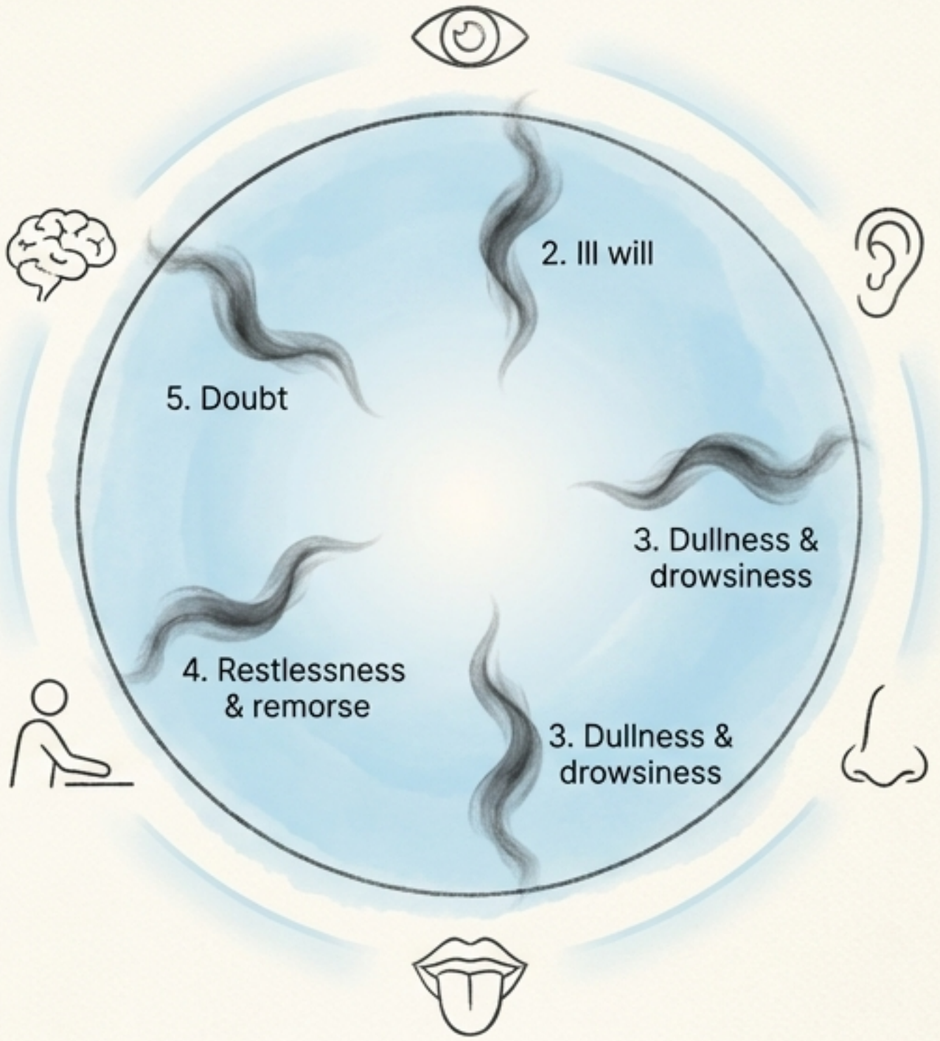
Cultivating the Mind: Restraint and Awareness

With ethics established, the practitioner cultivates:

- **Noble Sense Restraint**: Not getting caught up in the “features and details” of what is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, felt, or thought. This leads to “an unsullied bliss inside themselves.”
- **Mindfulness & Situational Awareness**: Being fully present in every action, from walking and eating to speaking and keeping silent.



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The First Traces of the Realized One: The Four Absorptions

First Absorption		rapture and bliss born of seclusion
Second Absorption		internal clarity
Third Absorption		equanimity and mindful bliss
Fourth Absorption		pure equanimity and mindfulness

After each absorption, the text states: “This, brahmin, is that which is called ‘a footprint of the Realized One’... But a noble disciple does not yet come to the conclusion.”

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Unlocking Insight: The Three Higher Knowledges

With a mind that is ‘purified, bright, flawless, pliable, workable, steady, and imperturbable,’ the practitioner extends it to gain direct knowledge:

1. **Recollection of Past Lives:** Recalling thousands of past rebirths across eons, “with features and details.”

2. **The Death & Rebirth of Beings:** Seeing with “clairvoyance that is purified and surpasses the human” how beings pass on according to their deeds.

3. **The Ending of Defilements:** Truly understanding the Four Noble Truths and the nature of suffering and its cessation.

Even here, the text says the disciple is only *coming to* the conclusion, not that it is final.

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The Sighting: Freedom Through Direct Knowledge

“Knowing and seeing like this, their mind is freed from the defilements of sensuality, desire to be reborn, and ignorance. When they’re freed, they know they’re freed.”

The Final Conclusion: “Rebirth is ended, the spiritual journey has been completed, what had to be done has been done, there is nothing further for this place.”

The Buddha’s Declaration: “At this point a noble disciple has come to the conclusion, ‘The Blessed One is a fully awakened Buddha…’ And it is at this point that the simile of the elephant’s footprint has been completed in detail.”

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As if He Were Righting the Overturned

“Excellent, worthy Gotama! Excellent! As if he were righting the overturned, or revealing the hidden, or pointing out the path to the lost, or lighting a lamp in the dark so people with clear eyes can see what’s there, worthy Gotama has made the teaching clear in many ways.”

“I go for refuge to the worthy Gotama, to the teaching, and to the mendicant Saṅgha. From this day forth, may th-worthy Gotama remember me as a lay follower who has gone for refuge for life.’

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